

4.15.2020 Easter midweek meditation

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

1 Peter 1:1-9; Acts 3:11-16

(Clement of Alexandria)

“The New Song”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

The theme of the new midweek series is “Easter People: Alive with Hope.” When I think of Easter I think of a joyful message that witnesses to people alive with hope. Peter wrote of this, “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.*” “New birth into a living hope” is what the presence of Christ gives us each day. Peter was writing to churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia where Christianity was already growing and present within the lifetime of the Jesus’ disciples. We know that in the post-apostolic period, Christianity was growing in Bithynia through a letter written in 103 AD by Roman proconsul to Bithynia, Pliny the Younger to Emperor Trajan, in which Pliny hoped that Roman temples, which had become deserted due to the spread of Christianity, would once again be crowded with people.

It is perhaps hard for us to imagine a world in which a Christian message of hope was both new and persecuted by the dominant culture. Though Christianity was growing, it was still misunderstood and often persecuted. Peter writes of this, “*In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.*”

Long before the modern cultural Easter of colored eggs and chocolate rabbits, Christians celebrated the risen presence of Jesus Christ that gives joy and hope. Again, Peter writes “*Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*” The presence of Jesus is a living hope, which believers both received and shared with others. After healing a crippled man in Acts 3, Peter spoke from Solomon’s Portico, “*And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.*”

This is the message of Easter that has not changed in two millennia: faith in the name and in the presence of Christ Jesus strengthens and restores humanity to wholeness. Early Christians shared the hope that dwelt in them by sowing seeds that helped faith in Christ take root and grow in the

ancient world. As modern people we express the hope and joy we experience in Christ with others. God continues to need voices in every generation who share an Easter message of hope.

One of my favorite images of this is in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, a Church Father who described Christ the Logos, as the “New Song.” For Clement the hope of Christian life – life in the risen Christ – was that the living and eternal Word dwells in us through Christ. In his work known as *The Exhortation to the Greeks*, Clement wrote to introduce the Christian faith to a Greek speaking world. Clement described the eternal Word as the “New Song” that “has made men out of stones and men out of wild beasts. They who were otherwise dead, who had no share in the real and true life, revived when they but heard the song.” The presence of the living Word, the true melody of life is what makes people fully human. The purpose of the “New Song” of Christ the Word is to open ears and eyes to the love and grace of God, the creator of the cosmos.

Clement wrote with insight that “We are the rational images formed by God’s Word, or Reason, and we date from the beginning on account of our connection with Him, because ‘the Word was in the beginning.’” For Clement, in Christ, we realize that eternity dwells in us because the eternal Word has created us. As a modern person steeped in a “newer is better” culture of material progress, to be confronted with the insight that “we date from the beginning” of the cosmos because of our connection to the eternal Word that dwells in us, comes as a word of penetrating peace and hope. Christ, the Word became human, died and was raised to show us divine love and grace that connects us to the origin of life itself.

According to Clement, “The Lord fashioned humanity a beautiful breathing instrument, after his own image; and assuredly He Himself is an all-harmonious instrument of God, melodious and holy, the wisdom that is above this world, the heavenly Word (*Logos*).” God created us to be instruments with the ability to sing songs of praise to God. In a time of anxiety, fear and troubling questions, Easter reminds us that the eternal Word sings a “New Song” that grants faith and hope. Like us, early Christians like Peter and Clement faced challenges of living in human society and sharing the “New Song” as a melody of hope in dialogue with the challenges of the present time.

To live as Easter people means embracing the Word, risen and alive in us. Easter is a time to see that God loves us and dwells in us in a profound way as ancient as creation itself. At Easter, the resurrection of Christ restores the image of God in us that had been lost to sin. Humanity remains sinful and broken, but through faith, Christ give us hope and peace for today and tomorrow. Amen.

Easter 1 midweek reading: Clement of Alexandria (c.150-c.210)

Exhortation to the Greeks (from Chapter 1)

“The New Song”

“See how mighty is the New Song! It has made men out of stones and men out of wild beasts. They who were otherwise dead, who had no share in the real and true life, revived when they but heard the song...

“The Lord fashioned man a beautiful breathing instrument, after his own image; and assuredly He Himself is an all-harmonious instrument of God, melodious and holy, the wisdom that is above this world, the heavenly Word (*Logos*).

What then is the purpose of this instrument, the Word of God, the Lord, and the New Song? To open the eyes of the blind, to unstop the ears of the deaf, and to lead the halt and erring into the way of righteousness; to reveal God to foolish men, to make an end of corruption, to vanquish death, to reconcile disobedient children of the Father. The instrument of God is loving to men. The Lord pities, chastens, exhorts, admonishes, saves and guards us; and, over and above this, promises the kingdom of heaven as reward for our discipleship, while the only joy He has of us is that we are saved. For wickedness feeds upon the corruption of men; but truth, like the bee, does no harm to anything in the world, but takes delight only in the salvation of men. You have then God’s promise; you have His love to man: partake of His grace.

And do not suppose that my song of salvation is new in the same sense as an implement or a house. For it was “before the morning star”; and, “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” But error is old and truth appears to be a new thing...

“We are the rational images formed by God’s Word, or Reason, and we date from the beginning on account of our connection with Him, because “the Word was in the beginning.” Well, because the Word was from the first, He was and is the divine beginning of all things; but because He lately took a name - the name consecrated of old and worthy of power, the Christ - I have called Him the New Song.

The Word, then that is the Christ, is the cause both of our being long ago (for He was in God) and of our well-being... This is the New Song, namely, the manifestation which has but now shined forth among us, of Him who was in the beginning, the pre-existent Word.”

Book recommendations:

Clement of Alexandria. The Loeb Classical Library (92), (Butterworth, G.W., trans.) Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1919 (1982 reprint).

Encyclopedia of Early Christianity. Edited by Everett Ferguson. New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1998.

Clement of Alexandria (c.150-c.210)

Titus Flavius Clemens Alexandrinus, also known as Clement of Alexandria was a Church Father and theologian. Little is known of his life apart from Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, and letters of Alexander of Jerusalem to the church at Antioch. Clement most likely grew up pagan, well schooled in the Greek Classics. He traveled to the Mediterranean studying under various teachers from Italy to Palestine, eventually settling in Alexandria, becoming a student of Pantaenus at the Catechetical School of Alexandria, which tradition says was founded by St. Mark, the Apostle. Clement became a Presbyter and teacher at the Catechetical School, where Origen is said to have been one of his students. He appears to have fled Alexandria in 202 due to persecution during the reign of Severus. In 211 he carried a letter of Alexander to the church at Antioch, and Alexander writing to Origen a few years later, spoke of Pantaenus and Clement as "those blessed men who have trodden the road before us." Clement is known primarily for a trilogy: *The Exhortation to the Greeks* (c.195), the *Paedagogus* (*The Instructor*, c.198), and the *Stromata* (*Miscellanies*, c.198-c.203), as well as sermons and other fragments. Several other works by him have been lost, notably the *Hypotyposes* (*Outlines*) a commentary on the scriptures. His remarkable writings have had considerable influence into the present: Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite; medieval Florentine theology, Meister Eckhart, Servetus, John Wesley, and modern Anglicanism all benefited from his writings. Clement is regarded as one of Christianity's first self-conscious theologians, writing at a time when Christianity was still struggling for survival, while at the same time making inroads into educated Greek speaking culture. Clement is significant for his methodology of attempting to inculcate the message of the gospel into a dominant culture, in order to transform it, and for his development of a comprehensive Johannine Logos-centered theology.